



Looking at Your Younger Self Exercise

📍 ACT

📖 Exercise

🕒 15-20 min

👤 Client

📊 No

In acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) the concept of self-as-context [1], also known as the transcendent self [2] or the observing self [3] is a core process that supports the development of psychological flexibility. It differs greatly from the conceptualized self which is based on internal narratives and judgmental thought. The transcendent self is the stable perspective from which one notices inner experiences like thoughts, feelings and sensations, without identifying with them or judging them [2]. Cultivating this perspective permits clients to witness thoughts and emotions without being defined or overwhelmed by them.

Research underscores the role of the transcendent self in improving resilience, especially during emotional challenges. Harris [3] describes what he prefers to call the observer self as the part of us that can witness without judgment, making space for all thoughts and feelings without needing to control or avoid them. Hayes et al. [4] extended this by highlighting how youth and adults alike can strengthen this observing capacity to withstand distress and choose to respond and behave in line with their values.

The “Looking at Your Younger Self” exercise facilitates contact with the transcendent self by guiding clients to visualize themselves at a younger age and engage with that version of themselves from a place of acceptance, compassion, and presence [5]. In a session it can be used when a client is fused with unhelpful thoughts or struggling with uncomfortable feelings. These often have roots in earlier experiences. So you can ask a client to reflect on when they first felt this way- as a child, teen or young adult [2, 5].

This process is anchored in an experiential exercise shown to enhance self-compassion and perspective-taking which help cultivate psychological flexibility [6]. Furthermore, ACT-based interventions using imagery and reflection have proven effective in fostering well-being and reducing psychological distress in diverse client groups [7, 8].

By engaging with a younger self, clients access a symbolic “distance” that helps them notice that their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions are transient experiences rather than fixed truths. This process strengthens the client’s ability to hold themselves with compassion when they feel vulnerable and guides them toward greater acceptance of their vulnerability while pursuing committed action in line with their values [5].



Author

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Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients cultivate a sense of the transcendent self by observing and compassionately connecting with their younger self. By doing so, clients can learn to notice the transient quality of inner experiences from a stable, non-judgmental perspective that enhances psychological flexibility and builds emotional resilience.



Advice

- The following exercise can be explored with a client in a session, or group of clients in a workshop setting as required. If working with a group you can invite a wider group reflection at *Step 7*. It can also be given as homework with the MP3 and a print out of the entire exercise from the introduction.
- For the best results, practitioners should prepare clients by briefly introducing the idea of the transcendent self as the part of them that notices all experiences without judging them. You can use the short “noticing the noticer” exercise to do this experientially. Explain that this exercise may stir up strong emotions, and that is okay. Encourage clients to approach the younger self with gentleness, curiosity, and care rather than judgment or criticism.
- This exercise works particularly well when clients are in a quiet, reflective state, either seated or lying down. It can be guided in-session or offered as homework as a journaling prompt. Emphasize that there is no “right” way to connect with the younger self. Some may feel warmth, while others may feel grief, or even resistance. All responses are valid.
- Practitioners should check in after the exercise to debrief the client and explore any insights, discomfort, or surprises that arose. Repeating this practice over time can deepen the sense of connection and boost the client's ability to engage with difficult emotions triggered by associations with early experiences, while remaining grounded.



References

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Looking at Your Younger Self Exercise

Introduction

Everybody goes through tough times that challenge their capacity to cope. Stepping back and observing our experiences through a compassionate lens supports mindfulness and acceptance.

Growing from childhood into adulthood entails multiple encounters with our own vulnerability as we step out into the world and begin to establish an identity. There will have been times where we'll have been shamed, experienced losses, made mistakes, failed at things, and learned from all these experiences.

Many times, we will have experienced criticism and judgment during difficult times rather than compassion and support. These experiences become internalized, often making us self-critical rather than compassionate toward ourselves when we face challenges in life as an adult. The result can be a tendency to default to an identification with our shamed younger self when things go wrong – as they are bound to from time to time.

This exercise invites you to visualize and connect with your younger self, not to judge or fix that part of you, but simply to notice your younger self and acknowledge their struggles. By observing your vulnerability, it becomes easier to replace self-criticism and judgment with self-acceptance and compassion.

Step 1: Settle and ground

Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so, or place your gaze on a neutral spot on the floor or wall.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Bring your attention to your breath.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Notice each inhale and exhale, gently anchoring yourself in the present moment.

(pause for 6 seconds)



Step 2: Visualize your younger self

Now you are going to connect to your younger self.

(pause for 2 seconds)

We've all had a difficult experience during childhood or adolescence.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Cast your mind back to a time when you were younger that you found challenging, painful or difficult. It could be a loss, a mistake, a failure to achieve something.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Bring to mind an image of yourself at that young age, perhaps as a child, or a teen.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Picture what you looked like, where you were, what you were wearing.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Try to visualize an image of the younger you that is as clear and vivid as possible.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Step 3: Observe without judgment

As you observe your younger self, notice their facial expression, posture, and mood.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Try not to analyze or judge, just observe.

(pause for 2 seconds)

This is the part of you that has experienced vulnerability, learning, and growth.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Let yourself witness your younger self with kindness and compassion for all the experiences they went through.

(pause for 2 seconds)



Step 4: Listen to their world

Cast your mind back to what your younger self might have been thinking or feeling at a difficult time.

(pause for 2 seconds)

What worries, hopes, or dreams did you have back then?

(pause for 2 seconds)

Continue to observe without judgment. Allow yourself to stay present with whatever arises.

(pause for 2 seconds)

Step 5: Offer compassion

Now, send compassion to your younger self.

(pause for 2 seconds)

You can gently speak to your younger self in your mind. You might say:

- "I see you."
- "You are not alone."
- "I'm here with you now."
- "You did the best you could."

(pause for 2 seconds)

Feel compassion for your younger self and their vulnerability.

(pause for 6 seconds)

Let this be an act of compassion, not correction.

(pause for 6 seconds)



Step 6: Integrate the experience

Bringing your attention back to your breath, take a few moments to reflect:

- How did it feel to observe your younger self?
(pause for 6 seconds)
- What surprised you?
(pause for 6 seconds)
- What do you want your younger self to know?
(pause for 6 seconds)

Gently return to the present moment. When you're ready, open your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Step 7: Reflection

Using a homework journal or in your session/workshop reflect on the following question:

"What does my younger self need from me now?"